The Effects of Ethical Disturbance Levels on Moral Judgments

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Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim & Felps (2009)

- Examined the influence of situational factors and moral identity on moral intentions and behavior.
- Individuals’ behaviors are mainly determined by their personality and moral identity but the situation may greatly affect the way in which the person would typically behave.
- Multifaceted self-concept – Individuals have different levels of accessibility of moral identity within their working self-concept.

Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim & Felps (2009) (Continued)

- RESULTS
  - As the current accessibility of moral identity increased, intention to behave in a pro-social manner also increased.
  - Financial incentives for task performance increased the accessibility of achievement-oriented facets of moral identity while decreasing the current accessibility of moral identity.

Reynolds & Ceranic (2007)

- Moral identity and moral judgments independently influence moral behavior.
- Motivational power of a moral identity
  - Individuals who view themselves as moral individuals will strive for the most extreme alternatives such as never cheating compared to regularly cheating.
- Social consensus – extent of social agreement about whether a proposed act is morally good or bad
  - When social consensus about a behavior is low, moral identity and moral judgment interact to influence moral behavior.

Reynolds & Ceranic (2007) (Continued)

- RESULTS
  - Symbolism positively affected charitable giving and individuals with high levels of internalization were the least extreme offenders. Thus moral judgments, moral identity, and the interaction of the two have independent effects on moral behavior when social consensus is low.
  - Internalization interacted with consequentialism and formalism to aid individuals to the most idyllic solutions.

Jones & Fitness (2008)

- Moral disgust describes the experience of disgust in response to exposure to moral transgressors and offenses.
- Moral Hypervigilance is the tendency of some individuals to attempt to reduce the risk of exposure to moral or legal violations.
- Susceptibility to moral disgust may influence participants behaviorally and/or psychologically.
  - RESULTS
    - Participants with high disgust sensitivity had a tendency to rate others as having a high moral risk within society.
    - Participants with high disgust sensitivity predicted higher estimates of the extent of the crime in the community.

Barnett, Sanborn, & Shane (2005)

- Likelihood of participants engaging in various minor moral and legal violations (MMLV)
- Seriousness for a student to engage in the MMLVs
- Participants estimation of the percentage of students that would engage in the MMLVs
  - RESULTS
    - MMLVs may have “moral ambiguity” and participants may believe that it is socially acceptable in some circumstances.
    - Participants were more likely to acknowledge that they would engage in low levels of an MMLV when there is no identifiable victim.
    - Participants were less likely to perform a certain behavior when there were more victims.

Present Study

- Examined the relationship of participants’ ethical disturbance levels and their resulting effects on moral judgments.
- Vignettes had 2 different scenarios in which one was more severe than the other. In half of the vignettes the more severe scenario was presented before the less severe.

H1) Participants will have a higher disturbance level when people, not property, are directly involved.
H2) Overall, the more severe scenarios will produce higher disturbance levels.

Methods

- Participants
  - Male 61
  - Female 66
- Materials
  - Vignettes
- Procedure
  - In vignettes each with 2 scenarios
    - The level of severity were either considered severe or less severe and were presented in varying orders on each vignette
    - Ethical disturbance level ranked on a 5-point Likert Scale

Results

- 3 Factor Within-Subjects ANOVA revealed:
  - Violation, p < 0.0001
  - Property > 3.648
  - Person = 4.134
  - Scenarios, p < 0.0001
  - Disturbance, p < 0.0001
  - Less = 3.928
    - More = 4.368
  - Violation * Scenarios, p < 0.0001
  - Violation * Disturbance, p < 0.0001
  - Scenarios * Disturbance, p < 0.0001
  - Violation * Scenarios * Disturbance, p < 0.0001

Discussion

- H1: Supported
  - Participants’ ethical disturbance ratings were significantly higher for scenarios involving people compared to violations against property.
- H2: Supported
  - Overall, the ethical disturbance levels for the more severe scenarios were significantly higher than the less severe scenarios.
- Many studies have examined judgments of moral and legal violations and many other have examined ethical disturbance levels. The findings of this study relate to previous research by combining the two areas of interest and demonstrates the interaction of the moral judgments and the ethical disturbance levels.

Implications

- Why do you think people were more disturbed by violations against people than property?
- The study may help lawyers understand the best way to present information to a judge and jury. As well as, possibly enabling lawyers to predict jury responses.
- Individuals may be able to better understand why people violate some legal and moral codes while refraining from others.